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ALESSANDRO GORI, Università degli Studi di Firenze

Personalia

*In memoriam Hussein Ahmed (1952–2009)*

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porary influential people; records which for us are often of significant historical importance.

Diana Spencer was a unique woman, a member of an older generation of Ethiopianists who were deeply devoted to the country of which they never tired despite many misgivings and disappointments. Her bravery, energy and sense of urgency to bring to light the hidden treasures of Ethiopian sacral art has inspired, and continues to inspire, the many younger scholars and travellers who are involved in Ethiopian studies.

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### In memoriam Hussein Ahmed (1952–2009)

ALESSANDRO GORI, Università degli Studi di Firenze

On Sunday June 7<sup>th</sup>, 2009, Professor Hussein Ahmed passed away at the still young age of 56 in Təqur Anbäsa Hospital in Addis Abäba in consequence of a heart attack. It was an absolutely unpredictable and painfully choking event which caused a sorrowful dismay in all those who personally knew the man and the scholar and in the whole community of the Ethiopianists.

Hussein Ahmed was born on September 22, 1952 in Gädam Ančaro (Qallu wäräda, South Wällo). He had his first education in his own native village and then he moved to Däse where he attended the primary and secondary school. Once completed his schooling, Hussein Ahmed enrolled in Addis Ababa University where he attended the history courses of Märäd Wäldä Arägay and Taddäsä Tammərat. Already during his undergraduate

studies, he started being interested in Ethiopian Islam: as a second-year student of Professor Märīd, he wrote a term paper on Ibn Ḥaldūn. The paper was very favourably judged by Märīd who encouraged Hussein to proceed researching on Islam.

In 1977 Hussein presented his senior essay. It was not on an Islamic topic as he would have wished but on Gäbrä Šəllase's chronicle of Mənilək reign. Some bureaucratic obstacles had prevented him from going to Wällo to collect material for his essay. In the following year, Hussein entered the teaching staff of Addis Ababa University: his teaching career was to last 32 years and culminated in February 2002 when he was appointed to full professorship.

In 1980 Hussein went to the University of Birmingham to obtain his second degree in history. There he managed to widen and deepen his knowledge of Muslim Africa but could not submit a final thesis on Islam. Instead, he prepared an edition of the earliest version of Mənilək chronicle. However, he came back to Ethiopia firmly decided to devote all his research activity exclusively to Islam in Ethiopia: his decision marked a real turning point in the field of Ethiopian studies.

Hussein's first scientific publication on Ethiopian Islam dates 1982. Since then and until his last days, Hussein painstakingly spent his entire physical and intellectual energy to shed light on the multifaceted realities of the Islamic culture in Ethiopia.

At the beginning of the eighties of the past century, choosing to study Islam in Ethiopia was an audacious decision that needed a strong determination and a daring courage. The field was tremendously wide but almost untouched. Enrico Cerulli, in his impressive doctrine and erudition, devoted a conspicuous series of pioneering and often still unsurpassed studies to different aspects of the history and culture of the Ethiopian Muslims, especially those living in Harar and in the Oromo and Somali regions. Ewald Wagner, accomplished scholar of Arabic studies and Semitic languages, in the sixties and seventies researched extensively on the history and language of Harar enhancing the available knowledge on the walled town. Apart from Cerulli's and Wagner's contributions, however, only some scattered publications (mostly of anthropological content) and a couple of general handbooks were at that time the references for the scholar interested in Ethiopian Islam.

The surprising paucity of the bibliography mirrored a more serious problem investing the very fundament of Islamic studies in the Ethiopian area. Islam has always been a much neglected topic by the Ethiopianists as the overwhelming majority of them was deeply convinced that Islamic culture and history in Ethiopia was – if not completely alien to the country and its civilization – of marginal interest and of scarce appeal. Only the research on Christian Ethiopia was worth the efforts of the scholars: Christian Ethiopia

was in the end the sole “true” Ethiopian civilization, for whose integrity Islam has always posed a mortal threat from within and outside the country. The history and culture of the Ethiopian Muslims was thus perceived only as an auxiliary tool to utilize or as an annoying supplementary weight to get rid of rapidly while researching on Christian Ethiopia.

Hussein Ahmed was well aware of this situation when he decided of his future studies: if research on Islam has now become a fully recognized and completely independent branch of Ethiopian studies, it is thanks to his life-lasting scholarly activity.

In 1982/83 Hussein engaged in an extensive field-work in Wällo, collecting local Arabic Islamic texts and gathering information from the oral tradition. In particular, he visited the shrines of the most venerated Muslim holy men of the region where he managed to discover documents, manuscripts and traditions on the history and culture of the different areas of Wallo. Hussein made use of this previously unknown material for his Ph.D. thesis *Clerics, Traders and Chiefs: A Historical Study of Islam in Wallo (Ethiopia), With Particular Emphasis on the Nineteenth Century* which he submitted at the University of Birmingham in 1985 under the supervision of Prof. P.F. Moraes de Farias. This work was eventually published in 2001 by Brill under the title *Islam in Nineteenth-Century Wallo, Ethiopia. Revival, Reform and Reaction*.

Since that date, Hussein kept researching, publishing, reviewing colleagues' books, and taking part in conferences in Ethiopia and abroad at an astonishing pace. He actively and extensively contributed to the *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica* as an author and as a field specialist in Islam. His scientific production is very rich and variegated.

Wällo, his homeland, was often the focus of his attention: his studies on Islam in Wällo demonstrated the vitality and richness of the Muslim culture of this region, in no way inferior to that of Harär. Hussein's contributions on Islam in Wällo opened a brand new perspective of research that he made carefully grow and has now become as important as the more ancient field of research on Harär. In this respect, Hussein's activity was pioneering and can be compared to that of Cerulli eighty years ago.

Hussein was also a keen and attentive observer of the development of contemporary Ethiopian Islam after the fall of the *Därg* regime. In particular, the revival of Islamic literary production and the blossoming of an influential Muslim periodical press in the country attracted his attention. Also the concerns of the Islamic communities, their aspirations and their expectations were often present in the writings of Hussein. The historical and connections that linked Ethiopian Muslims with the surroundings Islamic countries and to the wider Islamic world are also recurring topics of Hussein's articles.

Of course, the scientific profile of Hussein was and remained that of a serious and attentive historian. Even when he dealt with contemporary issues, he never indulged in slapdash attitudes; he always elaborated his views and considerations on an acribious analysis of first-hand sources (manuscripts, books, newspapers, magazines or oral informants) and he always kept far from quick and futile generalizations based on unsound and unclear fundaments and disguised in a pseudoscientific jargon.

The critical review of the available sources and of the scientific literature was one of the pillars of Hussein's scholarly activity. One may surely affirm that direct recourse to original sources and patient analysis of retrieved data were the two most characteristic features of Hussein's way of working. Continuing to strictly adhere to his methodology cannot fill the painful empty caused by his departure but can surely contribute to maintain his memory alive and keep the research on Ethiopian Islam on the high scientific level to which he brought it.

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### Abbreviations in Bibliography

- ICES 16 “16<sup>th</sup> International Conference of Ethiopian Studies”, Trondheim (Norway)
- IES Institute of Ethiopian Studies
- JES *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*
- JIS *Journal of Islamic Studies*